

Exploring Caribbean Shipping Company Records: The Case of Sandbach Tinne and Co.

With the Society of Caribbean Studies meeting in Liverpool this year it seemed appropriate to use this opportunity to highlight the archive collections of Sandbach, Tinne and Co held at both the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library and Senate House Library collections.¹

Sandbach Tinne & Co. (and the related companies and partnerships) was one of the major shipping companies working between Liverpool and Demerara in the 19th and 20th centuries. The records of and correspondence between Liverpool based Sandbach Tinne & Co., Glasgow based McInroy, Parker & Co, and of McInroy, Sandbach & Co., later Sandbach Parker & Co., of Demerara are dispersed and held in a number of institutions across the UK and in Guyana itself, including collections in the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and Senate House Library, in the University of London, the Liverpool Record Office, National Museums Liverpool: Maritime Library and Archive, the Lancashire Record Office and the Guyana University Library.

The principals of Sandbach Tinne and Co were to occupy important roles in Liverpool society, including Samuel Sandbach, who was elected Mayor of the City of Liverpool in 1831; and the younger Charles Stewart Parker, chairman of the New Exchange Building Committee, chairman of the Thames and Mersey Insurance Company, a director of the Liverpool and London and Globe Life and Fire Insurance Company, and a trustee for the Bluecoat Hospital.

In Demerara, McInroy Sandbach and Co., were described as:

“looked up to as the Rothschilds of Demerara, rich and influential. Many estates were heavily mortgaged to them, their whole business connected to the arrangements to which the mortgagers were strictly tied down. All the sugar must be shipped home in THEIR ships, under THEIR agency both here and at home, and so much every year; all plantation stores to be bought of THEM; and other pickings, highly profitable to the mortgagee, who got full rates and commissions: considerably more so than planting was to unfortunate mortgagers, who got about as much as would just keep them on their legs. Other produce such as coffee and cotton was subject to like conditions.”

(Journal of JC Cheveley, clerk with John and William Pattinson Bros, Commission Merchants, Georgetown, British Guiana, 1821-1825, vol. 2, p. 124, held in London Missionary Society archives, SOAS [CWM/LMS/12/05/03](#))

¹ ICS 70 1807-1882 bought by ICS 1978 (£200) after being bought by stamp dealer J Barefoot Investments for envelopes and stamps (through Philips Auctions)

SHL MS677 1808-1909: items 1-71 bought from W Myers and Co 1966; items 72-570 bought from Dillons University Bookshop, 1975 as addition to Goldsmiths Library of Economic Literature, mounted into bound volumes

Working with the records reveals a somewhat confusing set of business and personal relationships, with partnerships across Grenada, Demerara, Glasgow, and Liverpool formed, dissolved and reformed and marriage further binding and linking individuals within these business arrangements. A brief history may help, which starts with the coming together of a group of Scottish businessmen and fortune seekers, in Demerara, who formed two firms in 1792, with a joint capital stock of £14,000: Robertson Parker & Co. in Grenada and McInroy Sandbach and Co. in Demerara. The partners were initially George Robertson, Charles Stewart Parker and James McInroy with equal shares each and Samuel Sandbach (Robertson's clerk) with a half share.

In 1802 the remaining three partners were in Britain and formed the company of McInroy, Parker & Co. in Glasgow. In 1803 Mr. Sandbach, having married a niece of the late Mr. Robertson (and cousin of Parker's wife) moved to Liverpool and with Mr. McInroy set up a branch of the firm. By 1813 the headquarters were transferred to Liverpool and the same year saw Mr. Phillip Frederick Tinne join the partnership which was then renamed Sandbach, Tinne & Company. Philip Frederick Tinne had been Government Secretary in Demarara before the Dutch cession to the British.

Sandbach, Tinne and Co in Liverpool acted as importer and exporter and shipping agent to Demerara. The Demerara partnership McInroy, Sandbach and Co received and sent material from and to Liverpool, but was also concerned with holding and running plantations, trading, and running its own merchant house and granting mortgages to other plantation holders in the colony.

These records give insight into the commercial relationships between Liverpool, London and Glasgow, and Demerara. The papers reveal aspects of shipping and trade in sugar, molasses, rum, coffee, fish and cotton, as well as the passage of indentured labourers; and also discuss the purchase and sale of estates and make incidental references to French, Dutch and English plantations in Guiana, relationships between traders and plantation owners, financial and credit arrangements which underpinned the Demerara plantation economy, comments on weather, crop productivity, and health affecting the colony, the state of the labour force, and the importation of machinery and increased mechanisation of the plantation economy. The letters also provide detailed contemporary observations on political and economic conditions in the Caribbean and Europe.

This paper will highlight how the letters can both illustrate and add depth to our understanding of Guyanese and Caribbean history.

This paper will concentrate on the earlier history of the firms, and themes of matters of business and shipping; concerns about slave unrest and rebellion; and labour shortages and early attempts to overcome these before large scale Indian and Chinese indentured labour migration.

Much of the correspondence is of course concerned with matters of business, shipping manifestos and inventories of goods. A typical letter was sent on 23rd March 1811 from James McInroy in Glasgow, to Samuel Sandbach in Liverpool, enclosing a letter from George Buchanan (sent from Demerary, 31st January, 1811) ICS70/13.

“Two days ago I received Mr Sandbach favour of 1st by the *Union* and am sorry to hear of markets being still in the same dull state. The butter by the *Union* I expect will do well as I believe there is not much in the country – I now look daily for the *John* as the *William* has arrived in 29 days from Liverpool. I also think the *Demerary* ought to have been home – you will receive enclosed copies of my last – a balance sheet to show you how the accounts stand, and the inventory which I am sorry to see amounts to such a large sum – money continues extremely scarce and bad to get in and few seem in the humour of buying at present – a number of people are selling goods very cheap both at vendue² and private sale – which I am not fond of doing as I think they ought to bring a little to pay the expenses, and I am in the hope matters will come round in a short time when we will get better prices and readier sales. Our stock of goods is so large that I must try to get it lessened before I write for any more, other than a small lot of provisions which I think one may send by return of the ship. The weather I hope is going to take up.”

Generally the letters provide a rich resource for the economic historian, detailing inventories of ships, trading conditions and discussing credit arrangements and mortgages for many plantations.

One theme that runs through the correspondence is infrequent but noteworthy – a concern with and insecurity about slave rebellion or disturbances.

On the 23rd of January 1817 (ICS70/38) McInroy Sandbach and Co (Demerary) wrote to Sandbach Tinne and Co:

“The anxiety you express in your letter of 7th December in consequence of the absurd and groundless reports received thro America of disturbances here, would be speedily dissipated by arrivals from France. To judge by what we hear we are a great deal quieter and better off than you were on that side. The holidays were never remembered to have been spent with such propriety and moderation on the part of the Negroes as they have been this time, and as they are abundantly supplied with provisions of some description we are not aware of even the slightest symptoms of discontent having occurred to serve as a foundation for such a report.”

However, concerns at the threat of disturbances were realised with what is now described as the 1823 Demerara rebellion.

² Auction sale

McInroy Sandbach and Co wrote from Demerara (ICS70/86) a few months after the revolt on 7 Nov 1823 (to Sandbach Tinne and Co)

“We continue pretty quiet here in the last few weeks, waiting anxiously to learn the impressions our misfortunes have made on people... at home. Our military duties continue without relaxation and Martial Law we suppose will be in place at least until after Christmas. The trial for treason and sedition and for aiding the Rebellion – of the Missionary Smith, before a Court Martial is going on, but although his guilt is unquestionable we can not anticipate what the result will be”

In December (ICS70/88 27 Dec 1823) they wrote again, expressing concerns about the impact of martial law and the lack of support from the British government, but also equally concerned about weather conditions:

“The regular rainy season seems to have commenced the day before yesterday. The Colony has almost universally suffered very much from the long continued drought. The first cotton crop we believe is at an end and has turned out a short one...

“It is rumoured that Martial Law will be at an end after the 1st. The two companies of the 93rd Regiment which arrived here about a fortnight ago direct from Cork, are about proceeding again to Barbadoes, sending them at all has turned out therefore to be a mere sham since they are not intended to form a permanent addition to this Garrison.

The few days they have been doing duty here have not afforded even that momentary alleviation to the services of the militia – That relief has been given to the 21st Regt so up to this moment the only even nominal addition of regular force to the garrison here is two companies about (120-130) Black Troops of the 1st West India Regt received from Barbadoes about 4 or 5 weeks ago, and adverting to the crippled state of the Detachment of the 21st now here from deaths and sickness and general inefficiency we doubt if the effective regular force attached to this garrison is equal to what it was when the late disturbances broke out, so much for the promise of Government to provide an additional force – It is true the 27th Regt is said to be ordered hither from Gibraltar but that will scarcely afford any additional force since they were coming to relieve the 21st who are to be removed by the same transport – The detachment of the 93rd now about sailing for Barbadoes have never been quartered ashore, but have remained on board their transport and the Guard they furnished to relieve part of the duty of the 21st been landed each night – we are not in the least afraid of anything that can happen while the militia force remains as at present on the alert even tho there were not a regular soldier in the Colony for we consider ourselves when properly organised adequate to its defence but then all our private occupations must be neglected or abandoned and the expense of the Colony will be intolerable.”

More general unease is expressed five years later, (ICS70/125) George Rainy (Demerary) writing on 2nd April 1828 to Philip Tinne:

“There has been much uneasiness here for the last week, from some supposed disaffection of the Negroes evinced in attempts at wilful fires. A very fine Thrash Logis(?) at La Bonne plantation was last week burnt to the ground, and there is next to a certainty that it was wilful because they were not grinding at the time and there was no occasion or rational possibility for it being accidental because the disposition of the Negroes on that estate, as well as generally in that quarter are so disaffected. Two separate attempts have been made within the last few weeks to put fire to the buildings in the town, one the night before last...

It must be said that fire is a most alarming instrument of destruction in the hands of disaffected and evil disposed Negroes and one which they can but too often supply without the possibility of detection.”

The Emancipation Act of 1833 brought new concerns and Philip Tinne wrote to Sandbach Tinne and Co on 13th December of that year:

“The currents from the colony are by no means pleasant – the transition from slavery to free labour cannot be other than a crisis – Heaven grant it may be got through safely”

The Emancipation Act stipulated that the slaves would continue to work on the plantations as "apprentices" for a further period of six years if they were field slaves and for four years if they were house slaves. In British Guiana, the 1 August 1834 was declared a public holiday by the Governor. On the following morning, the "freed" Africans were surprised and very angry when they were ordered by their masters to return to work. On many plantations they refused to work, and the Governor himself had to visit some plantations in Demerara to explain the apprenticeship regulations to the African workers. By the 5th of August, the situation had reached such a crisis that he had to issue a proclamation ordering all the "apprentices" to obey the regulations. The Africans were thus forced back to work, but they did so reluctantly. From time to time short strikes occurred, and there were acts of sabotage, as during the slavery period, on plantation property.

The Governor, Sir James Carmichael Smyth, was unpopular with colonists in this period as he tried to balance the interests of plantation owners and the former slaves.

At the end of August (ICS70/197 30 Aug 1834) McInroy Sandbach and Co wrote to Sandbach Tinne and Co:

“A good deal of sugar would have been made on some estates but for the turbulent... state of the Negroes, in regard to which things are still very far from being in a satisfactory state, nor is there the least hope of improvement as long as the present arbitrary presence of mischievous P? or rather this P?

is suffered to remain to sow the seeds of the decay of the colony... It is more evident that there is nothing in the inherent constitution of the new system incompatible with the continued prosperity of this valuable colony if it were not wantonly and flagrantly misgoverned, not there injurious to the interests of the Capital involved than to the blighting of all rational prospects of eventual elevating and improving that class, in whose especial benefits the changes were intended.”

Labour shortages in the colony and attempts to meet these after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade provide another interesting theme that can be drawn through the correspondence.

Between 1807 and 1833 thousands of slaves were taken from the longer-settled islands such as Barbados and Dominica and shipped to the more newly acquired and less developed and exploited colonies of Trinidad and Demerara. (David Eltis, “The traffic in slaves between the British West Indian Colonies, 1807-1833” *The Economic History Review*, NS, vol. 25, no. 1 (Feb 1972), pp 55-64)

On the 13th July 1818 (ICS70/62) McInroy Sandbach and Co (Demerary) wrote to Sandbach Tinne and Co

“We observe that a Bill has passed the House of Commons authorising the Privy Council to grant licenses for the importation of slaves into these colonies from Dominica and the Bahamas³. With regard to those of the former island it is all very well but we think all persons that have the interests of this colony at heart ought to unite to remonstrate against the introduction of slaves of the latter islands. From the descriptions we have heard of them they are a dangerous set, having been in a manner allowed to go free with consequences of their owners having no means of employing their labour properly and were consequently allowed to work for themselves, and have led a sort of buccaneering life all through the islands and in frequent intercourse with St Domingo. Some of them, we hear have not long ago imported into St Vincent, and as soon as they were turned to regular work they contrived (being all expert sailors) to make off for St Domingo taking with them a number of the Negroes of the Island”

After Emancipation the labour shortages were more severe. Initial attempts included recruiting European indentured labour, including the first group of Portuguese labourers from the poverty-stricken island of Madeira.

In August 1835 McInroy Sandbach and Co wrote to Sandbach Tinne and Co (ICS70/211 27 Aug 1835)

³ 59 Geo III c. 49, noting that the move must not be disadvantageous to the slave and must not result in any breaking up of family groups, at the time no recorded opposition from the anti-slavery movement, only from 1823 calls to ban removal of slaves from island on which they domiciled.

“We notice the contents in your letter... respecting Emigration and quite agree in the propriety of attending to the requisites you allude to. We very much fear Mr Davidson will not be able to fulfil the first essential as it manifestly is, vizt (to wit) having explicit engagements with the people as it appears he had the greatest difficulty in shipping the people for Mr Arundell on any terms and in many instances the persons with whom he interacted were not those who ultimately came and had not all signed the indentures till they came here, which caused much perplexity here greatly increased by the difficulty of communicating with them and it does not appear that any express stipulation has been made to the stipulation description and quantity of their rations and provisions the want of which induces them sometimes to make unreasonable demands...

We fear the women will be no use for field work. It is said that those who are at the Thomas are not behaving well and do little good and it is rumoured that those at La Penitence required to be bribed by expensive extra allowances, the conceding of which of course the fault of the employers for if they cannot be maintained at little more than the negroes this will result little advantage from employing them. We fear our mischievous Governor will also paralyse their usefulness, by casting his blighting influence over every portion of our Domestic economy. Under the pretext of protecting them from ill usage he has proposed a law relating to their treatment, Government contracts with them, the operation of which we fear would in the course of time preclude any benefit that might be expected from employing them... “

Attempts were also made to import indentured labour from the Islands.

In early 1837 McInroy Sandbach and Co wrote again (ICS70/226 21 Jan 1837 to Sandbach Tinne and Co from McInroy Sandbach and Co) of the return of the chartered Brigantine Clifton (from the Islands)

“the adventure has turned out nearly an utter failure, Mr Watson being quite unable to succeed – She has brought about 60 people, several of whom are children... most of the people come are engaged only for 2 years, and at pretty high wage”

and in a later letter (ICS70/227 4 Feb 1837 to Sandbach Tinne and Co from McInroy Sandbach and Co)

“a considerable number... are not engaged in field work, a large proportion being only for 2 years & the greater number for 3. To almost all, considerable rates of wage are to be paid, in addition to which including the charter of the vessel, provisions and all expenses.”

At the end of that year (still before the start of Indian indentured labour McInroy Sandbach and Co wrote (ICS70/229 7 Oct 1837 to Sandbach Tinne and Co)

“By accounts from the Coasts everything is going on well – most Estates throughout the Colony are good...”

We regret to state that matters are getting worse, if possible, at Ruimveldt than before, the Negroes in many cases not doing half the work expected. They are the most turbulent set we ever had to do with. The coffee is ripening fast, but it is a question of whether they can be induced to pick it, even for high wages. The proximity of the Estate to town is, at present, whatever it may be hereafter, a very great disadvantage.”

A year later (MS.677/46(ii), October 13 1838) they argue that slave housing is the principal inducement to the Labourers remaining on the Estates.

In 1835 compensation claims reveal that the various partners in Sandbach Tinne and Co and McInroy Sandbach and Co were, “individually and collectively, by far the largest plantation and slave owners in the colony”. They submitted 30 claims for a total of 3324 slaves and received compensation of £173,577. This no doubt helped fund the expansion of their transatlantic trading fleet, comprising of four ships, and their involvement from the 1860s in the ‘coolie’ trade. (David Hollett, *Passage from India to El Dorado. Guyana and the Great Migration*, 1999) While much of interest in the papers relates to this era, time does not permit the telling of these stories here.

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